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I Was You, "Defender of the Palestinians," and Now I Want to Puke

Decades ago the left declared that Israeli settlers were fascists who could be blown away at will; today all Israelis are deemed fascists who can be blown away at will.

By Kathleen Hayes

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For twenty-five years, I was a member of a tiny Trotskyist organization. I joined because I believed it was the path to a more just world and stayed because it had seized my soul. My group was notorious, even on the far left, for its extremism and sectarianism, but I'd have felt perfectly at home in the "Solidarity with Palestine" antisemitic carnivals now taking place around the world. The occasional placard, chant or demonstrator might trouble me—an overt blood libel here, a Rothschild conspiracy theory there—but I considered these aberrations: abhorrent certainly, necessary to fight, but easily separable from a righteous cause.

Groups like Hamas presented us with a conundrum. Of course—we said—Marxists oppose terrorism. Of course Hamas is reactionary, misogynist, corrupt and anti-gay, not to mention rabidly antisemitic. Of course our vision of progress is the polar opposite of theirs. Of course they'd gleefully murder us if they got their hands on us. And yet…

A multitude of pogroms may be contained in that "and yet." And yet the Palestinian struggle is always just, even when it's led by the reactionary Hamas. And yet we are on the Palestinian people's side militarily, no matter what they do. And yet justice mandates solidarity with the Palestinians, even when those Palestinians, displaying a tragically retrograde consciousness, blow away whatever random Israelis they encounter living in the Zionist bastion. Any other stance is a capitulation to imperialism.

People far from Trotskyism are today eager to declare their solidarity with a "Palestinian resistance" whose opening salvo was the slaughter of over 250 young people at a music festival for peace.

Communism is dead, I am told, but it seems to be getting the last laugh. The cancer of antisemitism that always coursed through its veins has metastasized. People far from Trotskyism are today eager to declare their solidarity with a "Palestinian resistance" whose

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festival for peace, the rape of corpses and abduction of terrified women into Gaza. The right side of history shrugs. "They shouldn't have been partying on stolen land," they say.

It's admittedly late in my life for me to profess shock, but these scenes have left me feeling sick. Yet I can also, if I'm willing, reach into a part of my mind whose existence I'd otherwise rather forget and reconstruct the breathtaking lack of humanity that goes into such a sentiment. The astonishing callousness that may be shown by people who compost, read the New Yorker and adopt rescue animals. The resolute "I will not think about this" that shuts down part of their brains as they hasten to claim something redeeming in the slaughter of innocents.

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Everyone they respect, trust and even love—their friends, media sources, university professors, fellow students, progressive politicians—assures them that there are no innocents, not really, in Israel. The monstering of Zionists and Israelis that was part of my Trotskyist education is now just liberal common sense. A rapid evolution, or devolution, has taken place, a steady expansion in the pool of those undeserving of life. Decades ago the left declared that Israeli settlers were fascists who could be blown away at will; today all Israelis are deemed fascists who can be blown away at will. Decades ago the left supported attacks only on what they called "legitimate military targets"; today any Israeli toddler or Holocaust survivor is considered a fair target of the "Palestinian resistance."

Particularly after September 11, I spent many hours as a Trotskyist trying to parse the increasingly elusive distinction between righteous struggles of the oppressed and terrorism. The forces we wanted to cheer in countries dominated by U.S. imperialism seemed keener to bomb rival religious sects' street markets and mosques than the occupying American troops. Armed with our Marxist program from the safety of our well-appointed homes, we surveyed the world—an ever more grisly world of suicide bombings and indiscriminate slaughter—determined that some piteous sigh of the oppressed must be heard somewhere in this carnage. It never occurred to us that these sighs were in fact murderous howls emerging from an unambiguously more dangerous threat to humanity.

No struggle so generously slaked our need to summon virtuous victims as that of the Palestinians. Outraged dignity was the only possible response to anyone who dared suggest our vitriolic fixation

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thunderous reply. It was our side, the Red Army, that smashed Hitler's Third Reich. Thus reassured of our unimpeachable virtue, we sallied forth to cheer (however "critically") forces that draw inspiration directly from the builders of the gas chambers.

I took leave of my party some years ago, but today I encounter their spirit in Rivkah Brown, commissioning editor and reporter at Novara Media. On October 7 she exulted on Twitter: "Today should be a day of celebration for supporters of democracy and human rights worldwide, as Gazans break out of their open-air prison and Hamas fighters cross into their colonizers' territory. The struggle for freedom is rarely bloodless and we shouldn't apologize for it." Confronted with objections that Hamas's actions had been singularly terroristic, she explained that "obviously" she doesn't condone rape and other atrocities. "I'm celebrating Palestinian armed resistance," she tweeted. Except Hamas's "armed resistance" is the atrocities it is now carrying out. Its only program (beyond misogyny, murderous anti-gay bigotry, corruption and all-purpose reaction) is genocidal antisemitism. "The Palestinian armed resistance" is a fantasy, conjured by Western leftists to cover for the purest evil.

My former comrades, members of my parents' generation, sometimes lamented about the 1967 war. The Jews used to be some of the left's most loyal supporters, they recalled, but 1967 turned them all into ardent Zionists. It never occurred to my ex-comrades that Jews responded as they did because the threat to the Jewish state had shattered their belief that Jewish survival after the Holocaust was assured, and because they were horrified by the sheer hatred the left directed at Israel for defending itself.

This is my 1967. I became a Zionist several years ago, but it was a decision of the mind: an extension of the tenet that was impressed upon me by the party, that if all people have the right to self-determination this includes the Jews. I then spent a period immersed in studying antisemitism until it dawned on me that I knew little about the Jewish people, themselves—only as victims. And that this victimhood is the uneasy legacy of my own family background: my Jewish mother's murdered relatives, her childhood flight from her Dutch homeland during World War II. So I began exploring my dormant Jewish identity, but that too felt like an intellectual pursuit, not really drawing in my heart. The Jewish people have been astoundingly welcoming and forgiving of me, more than I often feel I deserve. Yet I've found it hard to entirely believe I belong.

Now it feels personal. I am a Jew and a Zionist, and I intend to use whatever insight I have from my ignominious past to fight for my people. About the only thing that is certain about the coming weeks and months is that there will be another deluge of hatred against the

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heart and soul.

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